

News Release

Senator Pete V. Domenici

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DOMENICI: "ROADLESS" POLICY SHOULD NOT MAKE COMMUNITIES VULNERABLE TO WILDFIRE

Senator Seeks Safe, Sensible Wildland Fire Policies

WASHINGTON -- U.S. Senator Pete Domenici today asserted that the Clinton administration should be required to inform communities that abut federal lands of its fire control strategies -- especially in light the president's proposed "roadless" policy that could jeopardize local fire-fighting efforts.

Domenici today participated in a hearing on the president's proposed "roadless" forest policy before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Subcommittee on Forests and Public Land Management. Domenici said recent catastrophic wildfires that raged through New Mexico underscore the need for safe, sensible and comprehensive wildland fire policies.

With broad bipartisan support, the Senate this month accepted a Domenici amendment to the FY 2001 Interior Appropriations Bill that would direct the secretaries of Interior and Agriculture to publish a list of communities within the vicinity of federal lands that are at risk from wildfire, and the agencies' current strategy for fighting fires.

"I believe communities have a right to know the risk they face from fires on federal lands, and the fire fighting strategies that land management agencies will employ," Domenici said. "I believe the administration needs to address the impact the proposed roadless policy will have on local communities and fire fighters' access during emergencies."

Domenici's so-called Forest Health or "Happy Forests" Initiative in the Interior bill directs the Secretary of Agriculture to publish in the Federal Register the Forest Service's cohesive strategy for fighting fires, and explain any differences between the strategy and other related ongoing policymaking activities, such as the administration's national forest system transportation policy and roadless area protection initiative.

In addition, the Domenici amendment provides \$240.3 million for a program that authorizes the U.S. Forest Service (\$120 million) and the Department of Interior (\$120.3 million) to remove hazardous material to alleviate immediate emergency threats to so-called "urban wildland interface areas" or where communities abut forests.

At issue is President Clinton's proposed "Protection of Forest Roadless Areas" policy, and U.S. Forest Service actions to end construction of roads in so-called roadless areas in national forests. With 35 million acres of Forest Service Land already officially

“roadless” and formally designated as “wilderness” by statute, the President proposes that an additional 40 million acres effectively be managed as “wilderness” -- bringing the total to 75 million acres, or 39 percent of the 192-million-acre Forest Service estate.

Since 1998, the Forest Service has worked on two associated rule-makings, the first dealing with a proposed interim rule prohibiting road construction in certain national forest roadless areas. The second deals with an advance notice issued by the Forest Service on a proposed rule-making on a new national forest transportation policy.

The 1964 Wilderness Act (P.L. 88-577) created the National Wilderness Preservation System defining wilderness as federal land that is primarily affected by the forces of nature, and relatively untouched by human activity. While agencies can recommend areas for designation as wilderness, Domenici said *only Congress* can designate areas as part of the Wilderness System.